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## A Postcolonial Reading of Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna*

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Scholarly attention on Isabel Allende's novel *Eva Luna* has focused on the feminist concerns of the text. Allende herself in the numerous interviews that followed the publication of the text admits to the break from her earlier two novels whose critical attention had in general been categorized to be on issues arising out of the political climate of Latin America and her position as an exile writer. Yet, as seen from the interviews, Allende does not seem too comfortable to allow her work to be read solely on the basis of politics. This new novel as she discloses is "about storytelling and about being a woman". The question that bears in mind however is, can the literary be disassociated from the political? This article will present a reading of the text that will at once locate the text in the political as well as present its literariness to be part of the political.

In her interviews pertaining to her first three novels, Isabel Allende comments on a distinct shift in *Eva Luna*. The earlier novels, *House of Spirits* (1982) and *Of Love and Shadows* (1984), are explicit in their reference to the political scenario of Chile in the 1970s and the resulting trauma. As pointed out by Michael Moody, both these novels have a testimonial character, of bearing witness and therefore of voicing out the silence of Augusto Pinochet's repressive dictatorship. This form of narrative is especially significant considering Allende's journalistic background and her personal involvement (besides being the niece of Salvador Allende) in the events that followed the military coup of 1973 that led to her exile to Venezuela and her eventual immigration to the United States. As she points out in her interview with Elyse Crystall et al., *House of Spirits*, was triggered by nostalgia, "by the desire to recover the world that [she] had lost after [she] had to leave [her] country and live in exile" (Crystall 588). *Of Love and Shadows*, she continues, was "triggered by anger, anger and sadness, at the abuses of the dictatorship"<sup>1</sup> (ibid). In the same interview, Allende differentiates *Eva Luna* from these two novels, as having a "positive feeling", "it's about storytelling and about being a woman" (ibid). Yet, the question that this statement brings to mind is, Can "being a woman" (or storytelling, for that fact) be disassociated from the political climate of the region?

This problem is especially acute considering the close association of gender with the politics of power. In her interview with Invernizzi, Allende admits that her first draft of *Eva Luna* was strict in historical data but this defeated the purpose of "ambiguity and distance" that she was trying to achieve with the novel (Invernizzi 120). Crystall et al. notes, "In an attempt, perhaps, to avert a too easy bracketing of her work as "political", Allende insists on its

<sup>1</sup> In another interview with Virginia Invernizzi, Allende talks about the incident that prompted her to write the book. For her, the "anger and the sadness" is a result of having read a newspaper report about fifteen bodies found in an abandoned mine in Chile. These bodies were those of the peasants who were killed by the military coup of the juntas, who soon declared Augusto Pinochet as their leader thus leading to the subsequent dictatorship that lasted till 1990. Although no longer a Chilean resident, her awareness and identification to the conditions that prevail/ed in Latin America then and now is evident when she says, "And I thought about the women...of those men that for five years went around asking for them in the morgues, in hospitals, in concentration camps, in prisons and they never got an answer. Somehow they represented the tragedy of the disappeared in Latin America, not only in Chile, everywhere" (Invernizzi 124).

“literariness” The extent, however, to which these are not necessarily two separate and distinct categories is perhaps most evident in her fiction itself” (Crystall et al. 586). If *Eva Luna* is taken as a novel about “being a woman”, disengaging the political from “being”/ becoming would do more harm than good, loosening the thematic content that holds the novel together. Although comparatively scarce in its references to the political climate of the region, a justified reading requires locating within the novel those political references as well as placing the novel in its politicized and historicized arena.

## I

Colonial history is a looming presence in the novel. The first page of the novel itself affirms this with an oblique reference when describing her mother,

Consuela, my mother, spent her childhood in an enchanted region where for centuries adventurers have searched for the city of pure gold the conquistadors saw when they peered into the abyss of their ambition. (1)

Yet colonialism is not an advent of the past, for as the novel shows through its numerous references to the United States in relation to the region’s economy, the history of Latin America continues to be written within/alongside the history of neo-colonialism, the gold rush of the past colonial empires is now replaced by oil fever. Allende also chooses to set her novel in an unnamed town, allowing for the ambiguity to speak for itself. And while Allende fashions her characters to those that can be identified in the history of Latin America, for instance, El Benefactor who can be identified with the Venezuelan dictator during her stay in Venezuela and the General as Augusto Pinochet, the spatial ambiguity allows for an all Latin American identification.

The narrative time of the novel witnesses the rise and fall of dictatorship and the failure of democracy (which, as Allende portrays, seems to be another form of dictatorship). Such issues become postcolonial concerns; for countries in South America, the idea of the nation, as understood in postcolonial terms, of an imagined community and of a shared imagination becomes fraught with contradictions. This lack of connection is evident in the lines,

In many places people did not learn of the overthrow of the dictatorship because, among other things, they had not known that the General was in power all those years. They lived on the periphery of current events. All ages of history co-exist in this immoderate geography. While in the capital entrepreneurs conduct business affairs by telephone with associates in other cities of the globe, there are regions in the Andes where standards of human behavior are those introduced five centuries earlier by the Spanish conquistadors, and in some jungle villages men roam naked through the jungles, like their ancestors in the Stone Age (158).

Moreover, the sovereignty of the nation becomes questionable, for while sovereignty as an idea itself is questionable, within the context of dictatorship, sovereignty rests on a single person and therefore disassociates itself from the nation, a collective entity. The emergence of Citizens’ rights is probably the greatest contribution of sovereignty and the modern nation-state yet this denial of the individual of being a political subject then becomes reminiscent of Agamben’s idea of bare life, in which life is stripped off to its *bios* and the form of sovereignty comes closest to the Foucauldian idea of *biopower*.

Dictatorship allows for the person in authority to treat his own country as colony, depleting it of its resources. This is reiterated in the novel with every fall of dictatorship that it witnesses.

The Man of the Gardenia left in his private plane to live in luxury in Europe, where he is today, very old but elegant still, writing his memoirs to set the record straight. The same day, the Minister of the bishop's plush chair escaped, carrying with him a large quantity of gold. They were not alone. Within a few hours, many whose consciences were less than clear fled by air, land, and sea.... The government fell, and the General, his coffers overflowing, fled with his family and his closest collaborators in a military airplane put at his disposal by the Embassy of the United States (156-157).

Besides the allusion to the role that the United States played in the Chilean 1973 coup in its underground association with the military power, the constant allusion to the United States undeniably confirms to forms of subjugation bracketed today as neo-colonialism. The association of dictatorship to neo-colonialism shows that it is a continuous process. A page later the narrative continues,

Two years passed and the democratic power was consolidated.... Oil continued to flow with undiminished abundance from the depths of the earth, and no one was overly concerned about investing the profits, because at heart they believed the bonanza would last forever. At the universities, the same students who had risked their lives to topple the General felt betrayed by the new government, and accused the President of bowing to the interests of the United States (169).

And a little later the novel makes this condition more pronounced, civic and political duties are ignored while, "Oil flowed from the earth in an endless torrent, and prosperity lulled consciences and postponed all difficulties to a hypothetical tomorrow" (194-195).

The close relationship of the United States with the governing authority posits a close relationship of imperial sovereignty with the sovereignty of the nation (which in turn rests upon the dictator) as such showing a highly developed form of imperial sovereignty that old models of imperialism alone cannot explain. In relation to the activities of the United States in South American countries, Anne Laura Stoler states that this form of imperialism is sustained in ambiguous states of becoming. As such they cannot be seen or termed as imperialism but, "imperial formations" (Stoler 128), which according to her can be defined as,

macropolities whose technologies of rule thrive on the production of exceptions and uneven and changing proliferation...harboring and building on territorial ambiguity, redefining legal categories of belonging and quasi-membership, and shifting the geographic and demographic zones of partially suspended rights (ibid).

This is not to say that there is lack of resistance to authoritarian coercion (dictatorship or democracy) and global hegemony. The novel abounds with episodes of violence, be it by the state or by the people in the form of rebellion. Within the dictatorship, the coercive power meted by the state on the marginalized community of Calle Republica, beacons as a stellar example leading to the "Revolt of the Whores" after peaceful negotiations failed. While the revolt was a failure, the events that sparked off from it showed the first sign of public unity. Though public opinion did not support the cause of the whores, the violent censorship of the press due to its publication of caricatures of officials, "was the last straw for a public that for years had endured the abuses of dictatorship.... It seemed that at last fear had given way to rebellion" (119). However, the novel establishes the lack of organized rebellion when the narrator informs that "finally spirits subdued, primarily because everyone was exhausted and no one could remember the exact cause of the uprising" (120).

Aravena's comment after another successful election on the part of the dictatorship becomes a prophetic statement for its subsequent fall. He expresses the failure of mass mobilization that is based on the public alone. According to him, "the masses had never determined the

country's course but only a handful of bold and powerful men.... through a consensus of the elite.... He considered the role of the Catholic Church to be fundamental ..." (155). True to his word, the mobilization lead by the Church and the pact signed by the opposition parties lead to a revolution that was soon joined by rebel officers resulting to the overthrow of dictatorship and the dawn of democracy.

The novel, however, shows that democracy is no different from dictatorship; both manifest themselves to be autocratic regimes maintaining power by coercion. The democratic state still allied itself with the capitalist interests of the United States that sucked the country dry causing discontentment among the very believers of democracy. At this juncture, the novel makes an explicit reference to the Cuban Revolution, alluding to the Chilean administration's close association with the Leftist cause under Salvador Allende (159). Unlike the previous revolution, the new wave of revolutionary fervor is marked by its intellectual and academic beginnings. The guerilla movement only began when "some, convinced that the people would never obtain power without violence, decided to take up arms" (159). However, the novel again, paints a just picture, never interpolating violence to be one-sided. The inhumane conditions existing in the factories employing women for cheap labor portrays a form of violence that is psychological, emotional and indirectly physical. Huberto Naranjo aptly sums up state violence when differentiating the guerilla movement from terrorism.

Weren't unemployment, poverty, corruption, and social injustice forms of violence? The state practiced many forms of abuse and repression.... The people were fighting for their liberation.

In doing so, Naranjo also exposes the failure of democracy to elevate the country and the lack of freedom. This lack is expressed in detail in relation to the censorship of the press following the events of Santa Maria beginning with the President's decisive command to "put a news blackout on all their activities" (239) as a retort to the deification of the guerilla heroes followed by General Tolomeo Rodriguez's 'request' to Eva Luna to edit out portions of her telenovela that exposed the lies disseminated by the state (259-267). As pointed out by Achille Mbembe, "The official discourse made use of all necessary means to maintain the fiction of a society devoid of conflict" (Mbembe 7). Storytelling here becomes a powerful tool of providing an alternative history for it is Eva Luna's engagement with this activity in the media world that allows for the truth to be exposed.

The novel problematises the narrative of a utopic progress of revolution when it shows that a revolution against democracy can never succeed. Moreover, the rhetoric of the Cuban revolution can never succeed here because as pointed by Rupert, "There they were rebelling against a dictatorship and had the support of the people. Here we have a democracy that has its defects, it's true, but people are proud of it" (216). The divorce of rhetoric and practice, of idealism and reality, is seen in comparing Naranjo's speech laden with Leftist discourse with the reality faced by the guerillas not only in the society they are fighting for but in their lives in the mountains, where lack of supplies stemming from the lack of public support made the conditions for survival meager, enough to almost crush the spirits of the great Comandante Rogelio (Naranjo). Despite the failures of revolution, Allende does not question its integrity. In her interview with Crystall et al., Allende sees revolution as "an act of love", requiring "total commitment" and "sacrifice" even if the revolution fails. On the other hand, she also points out to its drawbacks, "...if they succeed, they become very rigid, they are the power. They are no longer revolutionary, they are authority" (Crystall et al. 590), a view voiced out by Mimi towards Naranjo in the novel.

The novel's preoccupation with the idea of the "promised land" cannot go unnoticed. The narrator confirms this when she says, "But even allowing for a history of colonization,

political bosses, and tyrants, it was a promise land, as Riad Hilabi said it was” (187). For Hilabi, the criterion for Latin America being a “promise land” rest on “...a man can climb or fall, be a millionaire, President, or beggar. It depends on his effort, his luck...or the will of Allah” (187). Allende’s ellipses seem significant here, for Hilabi leaves out the context of where really the “effort” and the “luck” are situated. While silenced by Hilabi, Allende does not allow for an easy climb towards success. Hilabi’s idea of equality extends to all criterions of race, ethnicity and class, thus raising important issues pertinent to postcolonial issues of immigration and multiculturalism.

The novel is peopled by characters from all parts of the world, Consuela with her red hair claims to be of Dutch origins, Eva Luna of both Dutch and Indian parentage, Rolf Carle of Austrian origins, Mimi/ Melisio of Italian origins, the *patrona* of Yugoslavian origins, yet the most striking manifestation of racial difference brought in a single temporal and spatial framework is seen in the baby with two heads, “one head was white by race, and the other black” (93) given birth by the *madrina*. The *madrina*’s multiracial and multiethnic stance has been established earlier on in the novel, when the narrator speaks of her religious beliefs to be a mixture of worship of Catholic saints and African gods and again reiterated in this episode. But it is not a narrative of acceptance that this episode establishes but one that is fraught with prejudices. While a two headed baby is acceptably an aberration of nature, the hyperbole used by Allende to describe racial and ethnic issues becomes pertinent in understanding the reality of the multiracial and multiethnic world that colonialism had left behind.

The novel is also replete with examples of multicultural co-existence, the most stunning example being Eva Luna’s first experience of the city after having run away from the *patrona*’s house.

I was awestruck. In those days the city was not the hopeless disaster it is now, but it was already growing-... assailed by lunatic architecture in an unholy mixture of styles: Italian marble palaces, Texas ranch houses, Tudor mansions, steel skyscrapers, residences in the form of ships, mausoleums, Japanese teahouses, Swiss chalets, and wedding cakes with plaster icing” (56).

While this marked the confluence of a multicultural society, the schoolteacher who is in conversation with Hilabi<sup>2</sup> undercuts the celebrated idea of multiculturalism.

“Don’t be deceived by appearances, Riad,” the schoolteacher replied. “This country has many layers of phyllo dough.”

....

“Have you ever seen a rich Indian? Or a black general or banker?” (187)

The narrator also affirms the schoolteacher’s view. Yet the contradiction lies in the fact that the issue of race is silenced- “...but no one would admit that race has any bearing...in fact, they boast of being a uniformly brown people” (187). This marks the contradiction that lies at the heart of multicultural and migrant conditions, often celebrated, even within postcolonial studies, for as the narrator notes, it is an “*unpardonable* (emphasis added) breach of manners”(188) in an age that is celebrated for its plurality, interconnectedness and tolerance. The hybrid migrant existence that is much celebrated by Homi Bhabha is here undercut, for it does not represent a space of subversion. Not only is the situation of Latin America, as seen here, non-conducive of forming a “community”, a minor one within the larger framework of

<sup>2</sup> The conversation mentioned earlier in the essay in which Hilabi propounds his criterion of Latin America being a “promise land” (187).

the nation that allows for a “disrupt[ion] of the homogeneity of the imagined community of the nation” but it also cannot “disturb the grand globalizing narrative of capital” (Bhabha 330). Rather it acts as a mode of suppression for each individual. It is La Senora’s business that is both multicultural and multinational that nevertheless undoes the idea of the “promise land” showing it to be a land where the promises of the ‘American dream’ are fulfilled through networks of transnational labor (111, 186<sup>3</sup>).

The novel also shows another facet of the idea of the “promise land” in its portrayal of La Colonia as a utopia, which though can be described as a settler colony, for although it is founded by a South American (who is, however, not associated to any form of dictatorship), it is peopled by Europeans brought in from all strata of society to form a “perfect society” based on “sound Christian principles”. A utopia though that is almost xenophobic in its setup, portrayed as isolated- a community that prefers to keep the purity of its white race intact even if it resorts to inbreeding to avoid any form of indigenous culture to permeate into its rubric- “no one spoke Spanish...everyone was blond and blue eyed” (80). The novel undercuts this idea of an isolated promise land and its impossible existence within the framework of modernity and dictatorship with the incursion of the government, “forc[ing] them to open their doors and welcome national authorities, tourism and commerce (ibid).

Yet this fixation with the “promise land”, of an untarnished land, can also be understood, as Nicholas Kanellos points out, in terms of the trend of Latin American literature of exile that centers on the idea of the “*patria* rather than on the fate of the exile” (Kanellos 186). Therefore, even though Allende proclaims her novel to be about “storytelling” and “being a woman”, the novel constantly reverts back to the idea of the *patria*. Kanellos further points out, “...there is a static vision of the homeland culture...this literature is nostalgic for the *patria* as before the authors left...”(ibid) as is evident in the description of the landscape that Consuela paints in the stories she tells Eva Luna. However Allende extends this idea by portraying a *patria* that is not limited by the timeline of the author’s own exile but by a *patria* informed by nostalgia that predates colonialism in her description of the Indian community in Agua Santa.

Those Indians, as poor as their ancestors at the beginnings of American history, had, even with the intrusion of colonizers, maintained their customs, language, and gods. Of the proud tribe of hunters they once were, there remained only a few sad indigents, but the long record of misery has not erased the memory of their lost paradise, nor their faith in the legends that promised they would regain it (246).

## II

The author’s claim of the novel being “about being a woman”, necessarily ensues to a discussion of feminist or rather gender concerns, the politics of being and hence identity. However, these issues need to be looked at in light of the political context that the text is located. As pointed out by Catherine R. Perricone, “Patriarchy is more than an externally imposed construct to establish law and maintain order in society: it is a pervasive ideology affecting relationships at large” (Perricone 84). She names the Church, the state and the military as bastions of patriarchy (ibid). The role of the Church in maintaining the status quo

<sup>3</sup> Page 111. “For lack of commercial vision in this country, her ideas- like so many others- were grabbed up by north Americans, who now hold the patents and sell her models around the globe. The automatic telescoping penis, the battery operated finger, and the never-fail breast with candy nipple were her creations...”

Page 186. Referring to the scandal of human trafficking and transnational prostitution that La Senora was involved, in which Dominican and Trinidadian women were found dead in sealed compartments due to a bureaucratic foul-up.

in the novel is seen in the case of the *madrina*, whose narrative of descent to lunacy cannot be separated from her religious beliefs and their conjoined duties. State and military forms of patriarchal power however, can be seen in the form of autocratic regimes, both in the novel's dictatorship and democratic forms. Evaluating the power structure of autocratic regimes in the postcolony, Mbembe notes that state power:

- 1) *creates*, through administration and bureaucratic practices, a world of meanings all of its own, a mastercode which,...governs the logics of the constitution of all other meanings within societies.
- 2) attempts to institutionalize its world of meanings as a "social- historical world"...turning it into a part of people's common sense...( Mbembe 2).

As such, the mastercode set for gender becomes part of the "world of meanings" that has become "part of people's common sense" (ibid). This is especially marked in the case of Melisio. Though Milesio as Mimi transcend sexual normativity, he still succumbs to the stereotypes of gender even in his subversion. The mastercode contains him- his numerous operations to transform his body to that of a woman's allows for the success of this mastercode which does not allow dissent, the result of which is seen in the punishments meted out on him in prison (184-185). He is, therefore, neither contended to be just a homosexual nor a transvestite (109); he wants to be a woman, both in affectations and appearance. Mimi's sexuality, though having its perks, is not celebrated subversion but one thwarted with disappointments, especially seen in her relationships with men whose only prerogative is to exploit her uniqueness. Following Mbembe, Mimi is, nevertheless allowed to thrive in the society because it is the grotesque permitted by the mastercode in its "dramatization of its magnificence" (Mbembe 4), a perversion within the confines of authority.

...when she is bent to a man's will and became fanatically submissive, I tried to defend her from her own madness, to reason with her, to thwart that dangerous passion. (189)

Her only successful relationship is with Aravena who accepts her as the "absolute female" (227) which can be read as one of the "avenues of escape from the *commandement*" via "simple change in intonation" (Mbembe 7). Yet even this escape is still wholly dependent on her male partner. Allende's views on gender equality is spelt out by Aravena when he says, "We all have something of the androgyne about us, something male, something female..." (ibid).

While Eva Luna seems to be comparatively comfortable with her sexuality, although her incestuous relationship reveals psychological issues resulting from the abandonment of her father during childhood, it is her relationship with Naranjo that brings up questions of gender, in terms of a deeper understanding of the self as a woman. Romantic love between the two does not materialize in the end. For Naranjo, the revolution is the only "act of love" he can commit. Moreover, Naranjo is also the novel's epitome of Latin American machismo which in conjunction to the revolution produces a deeply gendered process of achieving liberation. Naranjo's proclamation- "this is a man's war", brings Eva to this realization of a flawed revolution.

In his eyes, I would never be independent....even if he achieved his dream, there would be no equality for me. For Naranjo, and others like him, "the people" seemed to be composed of men; we women should contribute to the struggle but were excluded from decision-making and power (207).

This realization proves to be transformative for Eva Luna, forging a new subjectivity that is conscious of the weaknesses associated with it but nevertheless claiming it when she says,



“...mine is a war with no end in view; I might as well fight it cheerfully or I would spend my life waiting for some distant victory in order to be happy” (208). Her later pronouncement of the failure of revolution despite her acceptance of the principles of revolution- “...I believed that the guerilla movement would never triumph in this country” (245-246) - does not stem from her intimate relationship with Naranjo but from her awareness that there can never be a collective mobilization, because gender constraints are too rigid to transcend.

...silence would gradually erase everything and the memory would fade. (148)

In the end the writing of the novel becomes an act of retelling of Eva Luna's story, thereby foregrounding the importance of storytelling as an act of narrating the self. At the same time, it also becomes an act of remembering and documenting, for as Consuela reminds Eva Luna “There is no death, daughter. People die only when we forget them” (40). As such it is in the act of storytelling that Allende fulfills the dual function of the text, of being both literary and political.

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